

The Role of Leadership in Partnering
Lessons Learned from a Mature Partnering Program

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Abstract

Ever since Vice President Gore brought the \$400 hammer issue into the limelight, acquisition reform has been one of the biggest initiatives undertaken by the Army. Top Army leaders have directed senior leaders to embrace various reform initiatives. One of these initiatives directed is Partnering with Industry – a new way of doing business.

I conducted a survey on an acquisition program that has a mature partnering history. The 2.75” Rocket Systems/General Dynamics Ordnance Systems Partnering program is starting its fourth year. Based on the results of the survey, I found that leadership by both the government and industry managers is the critical element necessary to maintain the energy and focus of the Partnering with Industry Program. Learning from the successes and problems of others is one of the quickest ways to acclimate your program to the new way of doing business. I believe leaders need to address issues caused by changes in order to maintain energy and focus.

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since Vice President Gore brought the \$400 hammer issue into the limelight, acquisition reform has been one of the biggest initiatives undertaken by the Army. Top Army leaders have directed senior leaders to embrace various reform initiatives. One of these initiatives directed is Partnering with Industry.

I conducted a survey on an acquisition program that has a mature partnering history. The 2.75" Rocket Systems/General Dynamics Ordnance Systems Partnering program is starting its fourth year. Results of the survey identify and validate that leadership by both the government and industry managers is a critical element necessary to maintain the energy and focus of the Partnering with Industry Program.

Leadership is an important part of any body of individuals working together toward a common goal and mission. Today's leaders are challenged by the dynamic environment – things change and they must be ready to be proactive rather than reactive in order to keep pace with these changes. Some changes leaders are facing now result from significant downsizing experienced in the past 10 years - doing more with less. We can't do things the same way as we did in the past. Another driving force is acquisition reform initiatives changing the way business is conducted between government and industry.

TOP MANAGEMENT DIRECTIVES

General Dennis J. Reimer, Chief of Staff of the Army, stated: “senior leaders must seek out new ways of doing business. I expect you to...Establish long-term partnerships and partner with companies that are the best in their class.”

Army Materiel Command (AMC) embraced this guidance and instituted a Partnering for Success Program. The Command encourages partnering be applied to all acquisitions, where feasible, which supply the sustaining base. Major General Johnnie E. Wilson, Commanding General, states “Accomplishment of AMC’s mission depends on our ability to work effectively with our partners in industry. Partnering helps us to do this successfully and deliver the very best products to our ultimate customers-the soldiers.”

PARTNERING REQUIRES CHANGE

The Partnering for Success program is defined as “a project-specific, inter-organizational, dispute-avoidance process. It is not simply a ‘working together’ or ‘being friendly’ or singing and holding hands’. Rather...it is a specific process that must be followed to change not only the philosophy, but the actions of the parties involved in performance of the project.” (DeFrieze) 1999. It is not always easy for leaders to change the way they have done business for so many years. They may encounter resistance from their employees. Leaders must communicate their philosophy and lead their employees into the cultural change by example. “A leader doesn’t coerce people into change that they resist. A leader articulates a vision and persuades people that they want to become part of it, so that they willingly, even enthusiastically, accept the distress that accompanies its realization.” (Hammer & Champy) 1993.

LEARN FROM OTHERS

The best way for leaders to learn how to successfully partner is to look at a mature partnering program. The 2.75" Rocket Program is a highly visible partnering program within the AMC community. It has been used as an example of how partnering should be done in the Partnering for Success pamphlet and training video.

The 2.75" Rocket Systems Project Manager and General Dynamics Ordnance Systems have been effectively partnering since a multi-million dollar contract was signed in November of 1995.¹ Partnering and teaming training started within 1-1/2 months of the contract award because immediate planning and implementation of the partnering process is vital. For the past 3 1/2 years, the Project Manager (PM) and GDOS have successfully utilized the partnering process to implement their production contract together. Leaders and employees were challenged by this cultural change, but they enthusiastically accepted partnering and find that it is refreshing to work as partners instead of adversaries. Any doubts they had about the effectiveness of partnering have been dispelled. It is, "in reality, a workforce multiplier, the utilization of which is absolutely essential to our future success." (AMC Pamphlet) 1994

RELOOKING AT THE PROGRAM

Recent changes have occurred that may impact the program. This business partnership is similar to a marriage; it takes a continuing effort to maintain it and improve with age. Relationships do not remain constant over time. Partnering momentum usually

¹ Note for clarification purposes: The original contract was signed with Lockheed Martin Ordnance Systems (LMOS). General Dynamics (GDOS) subsequently bought LMOS. I refer to our partners now as GDOS.

starts out with a great deal of speed, goes along at a good pace for a few years but may lose a little steam as it matures.

Analyses of survey results indicate that leaders need to strongly emphasize the partnering philosophy, openly communicate with other managers and their employees. They also need to train the force, bring new employees into the process immediately, celebrate successes and continuously reinforce, monitor and follow-up.

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

An old adage that “the path between neighbors becomes choked with weeds if not traveled often” applies to keeping communications open between partners. (LTC Jeffrey Staser) 1963

A leader must set the tone by constantly reinforcing the partnering philosophy to program participants. He must communicate his thoughts on the way all players should handle their relationships with counterparts in the program. It is not dictating the hows or whats but providing guidance and setting the tone. I believe a leader should periodically attend working level meetings to see how issues are handled, and review what has been done with team leaders to make sure it meets his philosophy.

Team leaders are the essential glue that holds partnering together. They reinforce the guidelines of senior leaders and maintain the pulse of partnering efforts. It is their actions on day to day program issues that demonstrate the partnering philosophy to both government and industry personnel.

TRAINING

Every respondent replied that it is well worth the time and cost when I asked if annual partnering training was valuable. Partnering and team training, both at the beginning and periodically, “is both valuable and vital. Training not only assures that everyone understands what partnering is, but it also assures they have the same understanding of partnering.” (Survey) 1999 “It gives members an opportunity to develop, review and practice the use of partnering tools, assess performance, share lessons learned, work real issues, assimilate new members, and reaffirm the commitment to both partnering ideals and to each other.” (Survey) 1999

I recommend leaders also consider other types of training for their team members. Courses on acquisition reform, Alternate Dispute Resolution, and team leadership for employees are all applicable, and tie into the partnering philosophy. As teams mature, in-house expertise may possibly be utilized. I also recommend leaders investigate utilizing government training schools. They may be able to provide quality training at lower cost.

NEW EMPLOYEES

There has recently been the inevitable change in personnel of both the PM and GDOS. While this change happens in many organizations, it must be recognized it is something that impacts partnering immensely. Almost every respondent to the survey mentioned that there was a need for immediate orientation to and acceptance of the partnering philosophy by new employees. To quote one respondent: “The only obstacle to continuance is created by the change of personnel. It is difficult to maintain partnering

philosophies and methods in a dynamic environment.” (Survey 1999) This finding is also addressed in the AMC Partnering Pamphlet:

“Significant employee turnover within the government and/or industry can potentially undermine the success of the Partnering relationship. It is, therefore, imperative that when personnel changes are experienced, particularly among the “Champions” or primary stakeholders, the new Partnering participants be familiarized immediately with and embrace the process, especially the necessity for open and continuous communication.”

There’s an important message here. Leaders must see that it is easy for people to revert to “old school” mentality if their counterparts are not responding to their needs in the partnering way to which they have become accustomed. Changes are inevitable; how well leaders handle these changes will ultimately determine if the program flourishes or flounders.

Another question in the survey asked what leaders were actively doing to help new employees to accept the partnering concept. Responses indicated leaders were aware of this need. Answers ranged from: “Primarily follow my lead – this is how I deal with the government and I expect you to do the same” and “Sharing the history of the experience and counseling” to “Exposure to annual formalized training program” and “providing a historical overview of the program from pre-partnering to partnering using examples.” (Survey 1999) New employees view the AMC partnering tape and are included in program management reviews where they are introduced to the whole team.

Based on the unanimous endorsement by government and industry team members, I find that formalized training should definitely be instituted soon after contract award. Also, yearly follow-up training “renews the partnering spirit among the attendees

and secondly, it brings new people that are not familiar with the process up to speed quickly.” (Survey) 1999. The 2.75” team utilized the same facilitators for the last three years and plans to utilize them again for the fourth year. It should be mentioned that training should be held at a neutral site so the team members are not easily called away by business.

CELEBRATE SUCCESS

Leaders may overlook the importance of celebrating employee’s successes. I am referring to success as employees showing that they have demonstrated, simply by their actions, that they operate as true partners with their co-workers. General Dynamics initiated a delightful way of recognizing the partnering successes of employees. At each Program Management Review, “The ASWAD” award “is presented to the government or industry team member who best exemplifies the partnering spirit of breaking down barriers, thinking outside the box, and working together to achieve program success.” (Survey 1999) In fact, “The ASWAD” is actually a broken barrier from a subcontractor’s parking lot, which Jon Aswad, a GDOS employee, accidentally drove through in a late-night rush. Recipients highly value this serious, yet fun, recognition.

CONCLUSION

I found a passage by 2LT Lawrence E. Collins Jr. in the book In Pursuit of Excellence that was so applicable to my subject I thought I should share it. This paragraph summarizes everything:

“Successful leadership has many faces to it. A leader must know the fundamentals of leadership, but must also be able to improvise. Answers to most leadership puzzles will never be found in a book because the people involved will change constantly, causing new puzzles. A successful leader must be able to understand people and human nature. Leaders need to know

the limits and capabilities of those they lead to maximize their potential. Being able to adapt to changing situations quickly and effectively has always been the hallmark of the more successful leaders.”

Changing the way we do business requires leaders to be motivators, innovators, trainers and mentors. By looking at the leaders who have successfully experienced the Partnering with Industry process, they can learn techniques that work and look for the inevitable pitfalls caused by changes.

Partnering with Industry is an acquisition reform that is beneficial to both government and industry. My survey results validate this. But the responses this survey also indicate that the role of leadership is critical to success. Communicating, training, orientating new employees and celebrating successes are all the keys that leaders must use to unlock the door to successful continuance of the partnering process.

“Partnering works if it is taken seriously. But will not be taken seriously if the commitment is not from the top down.” (Survey 1999)

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